Dalit political Art In Nepal

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According to a government estimate, Dalits constitute about 17% of Nepal's population. Dalits in Nepal have faced discrimination similar to that in India and occupy the lowest rung in the social hierarchy. While Nepalese Dalits are largely similar to Indian Dalits, their social structure is somewhat different. Nepal is mainly divided into three regions: Mountain, Hill, and Terai. The Mountain region experiences snowfall in winter, followed by the Hill region at lower altitudes. In these areas, castes like Kami (blacksmiths), Sarki (cobblers), Damai (tailors and musicians), and Sunar (goldsmiths) reside. The lowest region is called Terai, where Dalits belong to three linguistic groups: Maithili, Bhojpuri, and Awadhi. The social structure of Terai Dalits resembles that of neighboring India. Terai Dalit castes include Tatma, Khatwe, Dusadh, Musahar, Batar, Dhobi, Chamar, Dom, Badi, and Gayne (Gandharva).

Dalit composition varies by region. In Nepal, "Dalit" is an official term with government recognition. Dr. Ambedkar influenced the Dalit movement in Nepal. In 1956, Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar participated in the World Buddhist Conference in

Kathmandu, visited some Dalit settlements, and urged Dalits to become aware of their rights. At that time, the monarchy was strong, and Nepal's constitution was influenced by Manusmriti, which socially and legally sanctioned caste discrimination.

Nepal has a unique type of Dalits known as Newar Dalits. The Newar caste group is primarily Hindu, with about 15% Buddhists, and Buddhist philosophy deeply influences their religion and culture. Newars are considered the indigenous inhabitants of the Kathmandu Valley. The Dalit Development Committee has identified certain Newar castes as Dalits: Kusule (performers of funeral rites, musicians, tailors), Khadgi (butchers and milk sellers), Pode (sanitation workers), Chayme or Chaymakhala (sweepers and garbage collectors), and Halahalu (sanitation workers). The Newar society traditionally did not accept the fourfold varna system of Sanatan Dharma, but the Rana rulers of Nepal forced them to accept it. Some Dalit Newars have refused to identify as Dalits and filed a petition in the National Dalit Commission in 2003 against this classification. Based on these facts, it can be said that the Nepalese Dalit society is not entirely similar to the Indian Dalit society.

With the democratic movement in Nepal, the Dalit movement gradually gained momentum, but its pace has been very slow compared to India. A major reason was the continuation of the monarchy until 2008 and the old constitution based on Manusmriti.

The use of art in political movements in Nepal mainly began with the Maoist movement. Maoists had their cultural squads that traveled village to village to spread their ideas easily. These mediums included street plays, posters, songs, forum

theater, and paintings. Maoists extensively used street plays and songs to awaken the illiterate rural population through entertainment. Many Dalit activists were former Maoists who later used their skills in the Dalit movement to raise Dalit consciousness. Several Dalit thinkers have linked Marxist ideology with Dalit aesthetics and the Dalit liberation movement.

Besides the Maoist movement, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) working in Nepal have significantly contributed to strengthening the Dalit movement. NGOs widely use songs, posters, and other media to promote their cause. These organizations play a crucial role in planning, fighting for Dalit rights, and policy-making.

Many Dalit intellectuals and artists have developed and established Dalit aesthetics in Nepal. Dalit thinker Ghanshyam Dhakal asks, "Who needs Dalit aesthetics? What is its role?" He answers that Hinduism created social classes as castes, and the path to Dalit liberation is clear and direct, equating Dalit liberation with class liberation. Dalits should fight the exploitative system through cultural means. Marxist aesthetics are better suited for the Dalit movement as they advocate class liberation. Dhakal further argues that Dalits should prioritize class over caste.

Interestingly, Brahminical Sanatan Dharma uses art created by Dalits in its rituals. For example, Nepal's Damai, Gandharva, and Badi castes traditionally earn their livelihood through performing arts. These include playing musical instruments outside temples, during religious processions, and other religious and social

ceremonies like weddings. The Damai caste plays the prominent Panchai Baja instrument during religious ceremonies.

Despite performing at such events, higher castes maintain physical distance from these Dalit performers. Dalits have been deprived of many human rights for generations, including administrative posts and the right to bear arms. Thus, entertaining higher castes became a professional option for some Dalits, which they adopted. This proximity to higher castes brought both less discrimination compared to other Dalit castes like sanitation workers and butchers and also exploitation, such as women from the Badi caste being forced into prostitution alongside dancing.

Due to the long-standing monarchy, Nepalese Dalits were more oppressed and received constitutional rights much later. Nepal's ancient Muluki Ain (Civil Code) was influenced by Manusmriti, constitutionally endorsing caste discrimination. Interactions with Mongoloid groups also created new types of Dalits in Nepal.

Damai musicians perform at all Brahmin, Kshatriya, and other high-caste rituals but were traditionally barred from entering sacred places or temples, though this has changed somewhat in recent years. Notably, Damai women do not participate in such rituals.

Dalit arts in Nepal have a strong folk base, heavily influenced by rural culture. For example, Panchai Baja is associated with the Damai caste, and the Sarangi with the Gandharva (Gayne) caste. Like other developing countries, Nepal has many NGOs leading various movements, often employing Dalits themselves. Most funding comes from European countries and the USA. One prominent organization is the Jagaran

Media Center, established by Dalit journalists and headquartered in Kathmandu. Jagaran Media Center has done extensive work to promote Dalit arts, focusing on political and social awakening rather than just traditional arts. Their community radio broadcasts many programs on Dalit issues, reaching remote areas of Nepal. They have also produced and broadcast numerous Dalit songs.

One such song translated into Hindi states:
"What difference is there between humans? Place your hand on your chest, place your hand on your soul, make the soul a witness, all humans are one."

Jagaran Media's songs aim to promote government schemes for Dalits, laws against discrimination, and question casteism.

Jagaran Media Center has also commissioned many paintings by professional and amateur Dalit artists that creatively depict caste discrimination and Dalit resistance. One poster shows a giant bell under which half-submerged Dalits are working.

The Gandharva caste, commonly called Gayne, is an artist caste known for traveling and entertaining by playing the Sarangi and singing. They are considered descendants of the Gandharvas mentioned in ancient texts. Before television and radio, they traveled village to village spreading news and entertainment. They played a key role during King Prithvi Narayan Shah's reign in expanding the Nepali state by spreading nationalist sentiment. With the advent of mobile phones and the internet, the Gayne caste struggles to sustain their traditional livelihood. Many NGOs work to support them.

Court theater, a form of forum theater, has also contributed to Nepal's Dalit political art. Forum theater involves street play actors engaging the audience as part of the play to discuss social issues. It was introduced during the Maoist movement and later adopted by some Dalit Maoists to raise awareness and solve problems. Augusto Boal invented forum theater, calling it the theater of the oppressed. In Sindhuli district, forum theater was effectively used among the Chamar caste. Researcher Guvera has studied this.

Many NGOs use forum theater to educate the public about government schemes and social issues. The Federation of Dalit Women (FEDO) is a Dalit feminist organization working extensively in this area, involving many Dalit artists to create artworks and songs for advocacy.

One Dalit woman painter associated briefly with FEDO is Aruna Hingmang. She has no formal training but creates paintings through self-practice, depicting many aspects of Dalit life. She also paints non-Dalit themes but focuses mainly on Dalit women's issues. Aruna says her art is inspired by her own life struggles as a Dalit woman striving to find her place in society.

Aruna faced harsh criticism from established casteist art critics in Nepal, who labeled her work as trash and inferior.

Another artist, Manish Harijan, faced severe criticism from Hindu nationalist groups for his painting "Super Kali," which depicts Goddess Durga showing the middle finger. Manish, a young artist from a poor Dalit family in western Nepal, graduated in fine arts from Kathmandu University. Inspired by childhood deprivation and

discrimination, he began creating Dalit-themed paintings. He says his art expresses the voice of a silent society.

Songs of Nepal's Musahar caste also reflect their social identity. Their songs about clan deities clearly express that their religion is a folk religion with its own beliefs and identity, tracing descent from the mythical Shabari. Through such songs, the Musahar caste asserts its social status.

These stories of social and political assertion through art indicate the strengthening of democracy in Nepal and show that creative resistance through cultural means is an effective form of struggle.